Chorale Acadienne has invited past members to join them in singing “The Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s “Messiah” during its upcoming holiday concert at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist.

Chorale Acadienne celebrates 25 years as a family

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For a quarter of a century, Chorale Acadienne has been a fixture in the cultural and musical scene of Acadiana. Lafayette’s community chorus will mark its anniversary this holiday season by inviting past members to join in the “Hallelujah Chorus” of Handel’s “Messiah” during the group’s annual Christmas presentation Tuesday and Friday at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist.

The group performed in Kennedy Center in 1988, in Prague in the Czech Republic in 2002 and will perform at Carnegie Hall in June. But, their venues weren’t always so stellar.

“I’ve been through the high points and the low points,” said May Waggoner, a University of Louisiana French professor. “We sang in Kennedy Center and in a church so cold that my nose ran and in almost-empty churches where we outnumbered the audience — and places where we swept the stage before we gave the concert.”

Chorale Acadienne charter members, from left, Walter Doble, May Waggoner, Velma Clement, Judith Sawyer, Mary Margaret Comeaux and the late Mike Goudeau, are shown in this 1964 photo.

Waggoner is one of two charter members who are still with the chorus. Velma Clement, a retired administrative assistant at First Presbyterian Church, also remembers the lean days.

“Early on, all the singers were board members. We printed the programs, handed them out at the door and sold tickets,” Clement recalled. “Now, we have the programs professionally printed and the tickets are sold through Ticketmaster.”

Want to go?

■ WHAT: Chorale Acadienne
■ WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday and Friday
■ WHERE: Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist
■ COST: $20 for adults, $15 for senior citizens and $10 for children; tickets available from the Heymann Performing Arts Center box office
■ INFORMATION: 291-5555

Photos courtesy of May Waggoner

Former members invited to sing

Chorale Acadienne has invited former members to sing the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s “Messiah” “homecoming” concert in celebration of its 25th anniversary.

The concert will include other selections from the “Messiah,” plus “Ceremony of Carols” by Benjamin Britten, a contemporary work based on medieval texts, sung in Middle English and accompanied by a harp. The program will also include popular Christmas carols.

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Since then, Chorale Academy has given hundreds of concerts and performed in countries in at least nine languages. The group's origins can be traced back to a conversation in 1979 between Dr. Gerald Hubbell and his wife, Gerry, with Mike Goyeau, then the choir director at St. John Cathedral.

"He stopped us outside the church under the big oak tree," Gerald Hubbell said. "He said (then-mayor) Kenny Bowden said he could find $5,000 to start a community chorus and asked if my wife would play piano for it." She said yes.

"We contacted all the church choirs in the area and started Chorale Academy in 1979." Hubbell, who had been a music major before he entered medical school, soon became a member and president of the chorus' board of directors. Hubbell, who remained with the group until 1985, when his medical practice became too demanding, plans to be one of the returning members who will sing in the "Hallelujah Chorus." Over the years, the faces have changed and the numbers have fluctuated between about 45 and 90. Today's group consists of about 44 members ranging in age from a high school senior to senior citizens in their 70s. The first conductor, Goyeau, was a second, Leon Henry, has moved on to be replaced by the current conductor, James Haygood. Members come from all walks of life, including high school professors, real estate agents and salespeople. But there is a thread of continuity that remains.

That's one of the things about Chorale," said 24-year-old Judy Mary Sv exaggerated with Mr. and Mrs. Fontenot and an automobile accident on the way to a concert. "It's like a family. We've gone through births, deaths, marriages. We've had three honeymoon couples go on different trips with us. I did a Christmas concert in Eunice with first. Uniting the Methodism church and I was nine months pregnant. She was born within two weeks of the concert.

There were also lighter moments. In one concert, one of our concerts was called "The Fiery Furnace" and we performed it at Patima and for some reason, the air conditioner was not working. It was late May and we stood there, tripping wet and the group performed it.

We got into another room and - guess what their air conditioner wasn't working either. We decided we didn't have to do "The Fiery Furnace."

Goyeau remembers a rocky start for the group. "Mike (Goyeau) was fussing so much at the sopranos for their vibrato that a lot of them quit." The closeness of the group is one of the best attributes, Goyeau said, and the one that has sustained it through the past 25 years. "It's a family. It's not always a happy family; it's not always a fighting family, but a family that has gone through life together."